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## Too Mex for the Masses: Bringing Mexican Regional Music to Market

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#### **2008 NACCS Conference Presentation**

#### Too Mex for the Masses: Bringing Mexican Regional Music to Market

The notion of a "Latin boom" in the music industry typically conjures the swiveling hips and buoyant salsa-infused rhythms of pop performers like Ricky Martin and Shakira or, more recently, the driving island beats of reggaeton. Few imagine a Stetson-sporting *vaquero* as a representative figure of the contemporary Latin music scene. Yet this is the visual style associated with what is by far the largest-selling Latin genre in the U.S.: Mexican regional music.

"Regional Mexican" is the catchall phrase the industry uses to categorize a variety of musical traditions. These include the mariachi and ranchera sounds most people identify with Mexican national culture. It also includes musical styles linked to specific states or regions in Greater Mexico, including banda, norteño, duranguense, and tejano. These song forms stem from pre-industrial folk music traditions, and often evoke a pastoral, agrarian past. But today's performers adapt them to better reflect the struggles of working-class Chicanos and Mexican immigrants living and laboring in U.S cities. Many artists infuse their music with an urbane sensibility, and sometimes even a hip-hop swagger, as is the case with *narcocorridos* – gritty ballads about gangsta-style drug smuggling antiheroes.

The commercial category known as "regional Mexican" is really as much an American phenomenon as it is Mexican. Many of its most popular artists are, in fact, Mexican American, including Los Tigres del Norte, Jenni and Lupillo Rivera, Intocable, and Grupo Montez de Durango. A reflection of transnational realities, Mexican regional artists today typically have to do well in the States before they hit it big south of the border (Kun 2006).

Here in the U.S., the style sells more than Latin pop, rock, and tropical acts combined. It's one of few genres that haven't suffered significantly in the music industry's recent downturn. Yet despite its massive U.S. appeal, Mexican regional remains ghettoized within the music industry as an "ethnic" niche-market genre whose domestic audience is never expected to reach beyond immigrant communities in the West and Southwest. The music receives little promotional backing from record labels and garners the fewest licensing and sponsorship deals of all Latin genres, despite the fact that it outsells them all. Its standing in the Latin music community is so low that Mexican regional artists boycotted the inaugural Latin Grammys in 2000 to protest their vast under-representation in the show's award categories.

One of the reasons frequently given for regional Mexican's marginalization is the perception that it's either corny or old-fashioned. To unaccustomed ears, the blaring brass, polka beats, and waltzing accordions underlying so many regional styles sound either like circus music or Lawrence Welk showtunes. In sound and image, it's thought to contrast sharply with the suave *salseros* and Latin-pop divas whose sultry performance of Latin-ness has traditionally been easier for music execs to promote.

I argue that regional Mexican music fails to reach "general" markets, and attract industry support, because it presents a version of Latinidad that's either incongruous or threatening to the dominant cultural order. Beginning with the mid-century "mambo craze," record executives have tended to put greater development resources behind Caribbean-based musics because of their connotations of glamour, sensuality, and romance. Underlying this appeal is a tropical imaginary that portrays Latinos as "hot and spicy," passionate and sexy. Francis Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman define the verb "to tropicalize" as a "means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values" (1997:8) that is "overdetermined for the Caribbean" (1). *Tropicalism*, or the belief that Latinos embody an intrinsic eroticism and "hot bloodedness," can be understood in similar terms as, or as a corollary to, Edward Said's analysis of "Orientalist" discourse in regard to Asia and the Middle East – i.e. fantasies of an exoticized, eroticized, non-Western other.

This tropicalist orientation results in the marginalization of Mexican regional music – and of Mexican Americans generally – from marketing and promotional efforts within the domestic entertainment industry, despite the fact that people of Mexican descent comprise nearly 70% of all

U.S. Latinos. The general consensus within the music industry is that the boisterous rhythms, *charro* fashion, and gritty lyrical content associated with Mexican music holds none of the sexiness and exotic allure necessary to attract non-Latino listeners, or even more affluent and "acculturated" Latinos. At work here is a class-based but also heavily racialized discourse that characterizes Mexican working-class culture as coarse, tacky, and lacking in sophistication – what Latino elites consider "*naca*" or "hick" culture.

When regional Mexican groups appear in concert, they're typically dressed in cowboy hats, ostrich-skin boots, and colorful matching *trajes*. To their legions of fans, the look is sexy and cool, an expression cultural pride; there's a longstanding tradition in Mexican folklore that elevates the humble rancher or rural *campesino* to the status anti-imperialist hero. But to the majority of entertainment executives, this image plays into xenophobic stereotypes of Mexicans as illegal aliens, impoverished peasants, and dirty day laborers. According to journalist Gustavo Arellano, "The definers of Latin culture have decided that the most popular Latin music genre in the United States isn't worthy of promotion because it might lead people to believe that Latinos are poor and culturally backward, not slick and 'with it'" (2002).

Within the music industry, the subordination of Mexican regional music and the privileging of *tropicalismo* are quite literally structured into corporate organization. Most Latin music departments exist outside the domestic operations of major record labels, which have New York or L.A. home offices. Latin divisions are instead based in the Hispanic media hub of Miami and considered a component of the company's international operations – an arrangement reflective of wider attitudes about Latinos as somehow "foreign" or "un-American" (Negus 1999:142). In Miami, Mexican regional artists are handled by record executives more attuned to salsa-inflected Latin pop or overtly Caribbean forms of music like son, bachata, cumbia, and reggaeton – styles favored more commonly by East Coast Latinos who are primarily of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, and Colombian descent.

In her study of Hispanic advertising, *Latinos, Inc.* (2001), Arlene Dávila emphasizes how Latino cultural workers are often just as complicit as Anglo executives in reinforcing preexisting tropicalist stereotypes (42). Although many of these cultural gatekeepers may be Latino, rarely are they Chicanos with insider knowledge of working-class Mexican-American tastes and sensibilities. More often than not, they are either corporate elites recruited from Latin America or Spain or they're Cuban Americans, the only U.S.-born Latinos to make major inroads into the Latin entertainment and advertising industries (Dávila 2001:30). In the music field, Cuban ex-pats Gloria and Emilio Estefan are still dominant players, ensuring the industry remains firmly entrenched in Miami.

Much is at stake in the commercial construction of a palatable image of "Latinidad" within the domestic cultural industries. Although Latinos comprise the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population, and Latino purchasing power nears the staggering sum of \$1 trillion dollars, Latin media producers still have difficulty convincing high-level executives that this demographic deserves any attention at all. A key strategy Latin marketers employ today, which Davila makes plain in her study, is to generate a "unified, uncomplicated, depoliticized, and hence readily marketable definition of Hispanidad" by erasing both regional and national-origin differences as well cultural elements thought to be threatening or distasteful within the Anglo mainstream (2001:13).

In the music industry, this means developing products aimed at an idealized pan-Latin consumer who's hip, young, sexy, and relatively affluent. Unfortunately, this is everything Mexican regional music and its fans are thought not to be. Companies founder under the misconception that regional Mexican's listener base is composed entirely of immigrants who cling to traditional culture and have little to no disposable income. In reality, fans of the genre spend significant hard-earned cash on CDs, concerts, and related merchandise, suggesting that further investment in the music would pay dividends for media companies. As *Billboard* columnist Leila Cobo attests, "[We're] not suggesting that everyone should turn Mexican or start playing corridos, [but] information gatekeepers certainly do no one any favors by pretending that the market that sells doesn't exist simply because they don't like or understand it" (Cobo 2007).

Just as it's a misconception that the fanbase lacks disposable income, so too is it a fallacy that the Mexican regional audience is dominated by older-generation immigrants who pine for their rural homelands. In reality the format matches hip-hop and reggaeton in terms of popularity among urban Latino youth. Nearly 60 percent of Mexican regional radio listeners are between 18 and 34 years old – the age range considered the most desirable demographic in the corporate realm (Clemens 2005). Regional Mexican radio is second only to hip-hop and R&B in terms of popularity among all 18-to-34 year-old Americans.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Source: 2000 U.S. Census; Selig Center for Economic Growth, the University of Georgia, 2004

Despite glaring evidence to the contrary, the music is thought to inhere none of the youthful and rebellious energy required to appeal to U.S.-born urban Latino youth, or "Generation  $\tilde{N}$ ," a consumer base increasingly attractive to media companies because of its growing size and affluence. Mexican regional artists struggle to find corporate sponsorships, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage since, in today's sluggish music industry, endorsement and synch-licensing deals have become integral to an act's profitability. While Latin pop, reggaeton, and even rock en Español are increasingly used in television ads, film soundtracks, and cell-phone ringtones, regional Mexican sounds are ignored or outright dismissed. For example, in 2002, when Tecate attempted to re-brand itself from an "ethnic" beer to a hipper product pitched toward young Latinos, it dropped banda music in favor of rock en Español, a genre whose sales are actually negligible in the U.S.

Among the artists most favored today for national advertising campaigns are Shakira and reggaeton star Daddy Yankee because they're deemed sexy enough to have pan-Latin and even mainstream appeal (Clemens 2005). Shakira represents a marketer's dream, ostensibly because her hybrid sound and ethnically ambiguous appearance reads as "Latin" without screaming any one national-origin group. Additionally, she taps into several racialized economies of desire, as media scholar Maria Elena Cepeda points out in her essay "Shakira as the Idealized Transnational Citizen" (2003). With her luxuriously blonde hair – dyed famously in 2001 as part of a crossover marketing strategy – Shakira conforms to European standards of beauty, much as *telenovela* starlets and "Sabado Gigante" showgirls are expected to. She also embodies tropicalist tropes with her hipswiveling dance moves, even though they're actually based on bellydancing and her Middle Eastern heritage. Nonetheless, her much-touted dancing evokes a neocolonialist, quasi-biological discourse positing Latinos as having "rhythm in the hips" and "fire in their blood," reinforcing, as Cepeda points out, "the popular belief in an inherent link between Latina corporality and hypersexuality" (221).

What's being elided in these commercial attempts to market Latinidad is its overwhelmingly Mexican-American composition. Beyond being merely invisible on the mass-marketing radar, cultural elements coded specifically as Mexican are actually thought to "taint" or "degrade" mainstream corporate brands. The inability to view Mexican regional music and the people who listen to it as young, cool, and sexy is a testament to the low level Chicanos and *Mexicanos* occupy on the rungs of Latinidad's national-origin hierarchy and in American society as a whole. As a result, Mexican regional music is treated, in industry parlance, as if it were a "dog" when it is in reality a "cash cow."

There are a few signs that the industry-wide chauvinism against Mexican music and Mexican Americans generally has slowly begun to attenuate. Some companies have begun to shift their geographic locus as well as cultural orientation from Miami to Los Angeles, home to the second-largest concentration of *Mexicanos* in the world. Universal Music Latino's Machete imprint just revamped its entire roster from reggaeton to Mexican regional. Univision Music has always been based in L.A. and is the industry leader, largely thanks to its Mexican regional roster. And when the Latin music- and youth-oriented TV cable channel mun2 (pronounced "*mundos*") moved its headquarters from Miami to Los Angeles in 2006 and began airing more Chicano-themed programming, it tripled its ratings. Mun2's Argentinian-born GM Alex Pels relates, "Like it or not, this is the city with the biggest number of Latins in the United States. And the Mexican influence on Latin culture is huge. We don't want to put a flag on the channel, but we do want to address reality. And not acknowledging that regional music is the biggest-selling Latin genre in this country is a big, big mistake" (Cobo 2006).

Companies attempting to reach Latino youth without Mexican music are floundering. New radio formats like Clear Channel's "hurban" or "Hispanic urban" have yielded disappointing ratings with their reggaeton-heavy set lists. Reggaeton presents an interesting new twist on the decades-old tropicalist dynamics of the Latin music industry. Although the genre stems from Caribbean traditions, it resonates with pan-Latino youth through the common generational language of hip-hop. Certainly, young Chicanos bump it in cars and clubs, but it's just one component of an eclectic musical mix that includes everything from 2pac to K-Paz de la Sierra. The over-reliance on reggaeton reveals an ongoing refusal to recognize the cultural values of U.S. Latinidad's Mexican-American majority. Thus, the hottest-selling genre of Latin music remains ghettoized in broadcast barrios and ethnic retail aisles, kept from contaminating market-friendly island fantasies.

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